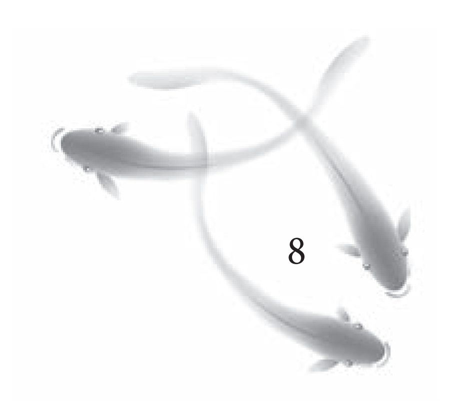




8

Of Fish and Knowledge

On the Validity of Cross-Cultural Understanding

ZHANG Longxi

"Que sais-je?" says the skeptic Michel de Montaigne. If the validity of knowledge is a basic question one may ask about self-understanding, that question is bound to appear far more importunate when we try to understand things in languages and cultures that are set apart and form very different identities, traditions, and histories. For cross-cultural understanding, therefore, China may serve as a useful test case because the mere distance between China and the West, in geographical as well as in cultural terms, makes it especially important to examine first of all the possibility of knowing, the grounds on which one can claim to comprehend things, to make legitimate use of a set of terms and concepts, and to acquire knowledge cross-culturally. Here we may encounter a skepticism that goes deeper than Montaigne's—a skepticism that does not ask "What do I know?" but, more fundamentally, "How do I know?" or "How *can* I know?" The question challenges not just the content but also the very possibility of knowing, and it raises doubts about the validity of cross-cultural understanding, the viability of intersubjective transference of consciousness and sensibility.

This essay undertakes to answer the challenging questions as to what and how one knows about different cultures, to inquire into the condition

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of knowledge that one may acquire beyond one's own linguistic and cultural parameters, and to establish a theoretical ground for the viability of East-West studies. Although discussion of such issues may cover a wide range of topics, the focus will remain on the question of the viability of cross-cultural understanding. That is why Montaigne's question seems so appropriate for our endeavor. It is that question on the level of different cultures that we are concerned with here, and it is to answer that question that I investigate texts and interpretations across linguistic and cultural differences, above the real and imaginary distances between China and the West.

THE TRANSLATABILITY OF TERMS

Before we look into the matter of cross-cultural knowledge more closely, let us first contemplate the following debate, formulated as a delightfully witty conversation between two ancient Chinese philosophers, Zhuangzi (369?–286? BCE) and his rival, the captious but invariably outwitted Huizi, for their interesting debate on the validity of knowledge will illuminate the situation of knowing and the known and thus help us focus on the theoretical assumptions in our own effort at cross-cultural understanding:

> Zhuangzi and Huizi are strolling on the bridge over the Hao River. "Out there a shoal of white minnows are swimming freely and leisurely," says Zhuangzi. "That's what the fish's happiness is." "Well, you are not a fish, how do you know about a fish's happiness?" Huizi contends. "You are not me, how do you know that I do not know about a fish's happiness?" retorts Zhuangzi. "I am not you, so I certainly do not know about you," Huizi replies. "But you are certainly not a fish, and that makes the case complete that you do not know what a fish's happiness is." "Shall we go back to where we started?" says Zhuangzi. "When you said, 'how do you know about a fish's happiness?' you asked me because you already knew that I knew it. I knew it above the Hao River."[1]

The last statement, that Zhuangzi knew a fish's happiness "above the Hao River," as A. C. Graham observes, asserts the relative validity of knowledge, that "all knowing is relative to viewpoint," namely, acquired at a particular locale in one's lived world, related to the circumscribed whole of one's "concrete situation."[2] The emphasis here on the situatedness or cir-

cumstantiality is rather significant as it puts knowledge in a real, specific, and historical context and thereby differentiates it from the abstract notion of all-inclusive, transcendental knowledge based on pure reason. Here Zhuangzi appears to have articulated a concept of knowledge completely embedded in historicity and aided by a sort of empathetic imagination, with its claim to truth based on the specific ways in which the knowing subject and the known object are interconnected rather than on the abstract universality of mental faculties. Perhaps this is the kind of knowledge that reminds us of Aristotle's notion of practical knowledge in his distinction between *phronēsis* and *epistēmē,* or practical and theoretical knowledge, a distinction "which cannot be reduced," as Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks, "to that between the true and the probable. Practical knowledge, phronesis, is another kind of knowledge."[3] Thus, against the challenge of skepticism, Zhuangzi insists on the cognitive value of his situated knowledge as valid knowledge even though he may fully admit his all-too-human finitude and fallibility. But when we speak of Zhuangzi's situated knowledge as *phronēsis,* we are inviting the same skeptic challenge; we put ourselves in the same position as Zhuangzi occupied, where, from the skeptic's point of view, the very possibility of knowing becomes highly questionable. It is indeed the same question with which we began, the question or doubt about cross-cultural understanding: Can we speak of Zhuangzi and Aristotle in the same context? Is Zhuangzi advocating knowledge as a kind of *phronēsis*? Can such terms and concepts be translated at all? These are the most basic questions we must address before we can claim to attain any knowledge at all across the gaps of languages and cultures.

Like the other similar anecdotal arguments in the *Zhuangzi,* the disputation "above the Hao River" purports to illustrate Zhuangzi's philosophy and present it as superior to its rival positions. What is remarkable about this particular anecdote, as Graham notes, is its playfulness, which, "in parodying logical debate is more faithful to the detail of its structure than anything else in *Chuang-tzŭ.*"[4] Graham, however, seems to fall short of our expectation to bring out the full force of Zhuangzi's argument when he remarks that the philosopher in this passage is "making fun of [Huizi] for being too logical" and that Zhuangzi can offer "no answer to 'How do you know?' except a clarification of the viewpoint from which you know."[5] But insofar as practical or moral knowledge is concerned, the viewpoint from which one knows is the only perspective available in

human understanding; that is to say, human knowledge is very often situated and conditioned, and its truth very often finite and relative.

Zhuangzi's knowledge of fish is not absolute in the sense that he cannot know fish as only a fish can, but hardly any knowledge worth having is absolute in that sense. Zhuangzi suggests that one does not have to *be* a fish to *know about* fish, for one's knowledge always has something of one's own in it. In Zhuangzi's claim to knowledge, there is surely a sense of playfulness and empathetic enjoyment, a vicarious pleasure that expresses his own happiness in seeing the free and graceful movement of the minnows, which Huizi completely missed or neglected in questioning the logical validity of Zhuangzi's claim. But the crucial point Zhuangzi makes in this passage, as I understand it, is not to counter Huizi's dry logic with a loose and slippery sophism but to pursue that logic vigorously to its very end (or, more precisely in this case, to its starting point), where it turns into its own negation. To be thoroughly skeptic about knowledge, Zhuangzi suggests, one must either give up the possibility of asking any question at all insofar as questioning already presumes the certainty of knowing something amiss, or—which comes to the same thing—one must admit that presumed certainty of one's negative knowledge. That is to say, by pushing Huizi's argument ad absurdum, Zhuangzi shows that his contender is not logical enough, that the skepticism of knowledge already presupposes, ironically but necessarily, knowledge of a certain kind, and that the answer to "How do you know?" is already implicit in the question, if only because it is asking about something already assumed to be known.

Skepticism and knowledge are thus revealed to be mutually implicated in a dialectical relationship. Notice that for all his doubts about Zhuangzi's knowledge, Huizi never has a moment of doubt about what he knows, namely, that Zhuangzi is not a fish; ergo, he does not know a fish's happiness. Throughout the conversation, Huizi's negative knowledge, his conviction that there is a difference between Zhuangzi and a fish, between "you" and "I," is stated most positively and assuredly. His skeptic attitude toward knowledge thus rests on his unreflective confidence in his own negative knowledge of the difference of things. For Zhuangzi, however, differentiation is arbitrary, and the difference between man and fish is by no means a fact established a priori; thus in positing difference as an unquestioned, known fact, Huizi already asserts the possibility of knowledge despite himself. It is Zhuangzi who proves to be truly radical in questioning the very logicality of differentiation, whereas Huizi never reaches that level

of questioning. But if Huizi can have knowledge of Zhuangzi across the gap of intersubjective difference (between "you" and "I"), we must also grant Zhuangzi the knowledge of fish across another gap of intersubjectivity (between "man" and "fish"). And that, in fact, is how Chinese commentators have traditionally read this passage.[6] However counterintuitive it may appear, such a reading follows a stringent logic that refuses to take for granted any conventional notion of difference.

One may protest that the difference between man and fish is of a different kind from that between Zhuangzi and the rival philosopher and that the former is a greater and more obvious difference than the latter, but in that case we are arguing, like Huizi, on the basis of our conventional notions of difference. Instead of doubting the possibility of knowing, we implicitly assert, again like Huizi, differences of various kinds and degrees as given facts already known intuitively. Zhuangzi, however, is far too philosophical to honor such conventional notions. If everything is either a "this" (*shi* 是) or a "that" (*bi* 彼), he wonders whether there is any real distinction between the two categories except when viewed from a certain perspective. The deictic function of all words and categories is predicated on a certain point of view, a certain center of consciousness from which the rest of the world is seen as differentiated, fragmented, and knowable. But "every *this* is also a *that;* every *that* is also a *this,*" says Zhuangzi. "*That* has its sense of right and wrong, and *this* also has its sense of right and wrong. Are there really *this* and *that?* Or are there no such things as *this* and *that?*"[7] Such truly skeptic and relativist reasoning is typical of Zhuangzi, but it serves to destabilize the fixation on difference as the basis of some absolute knowledge.

In his great "synthesising vision" of the universe, Zhuangzi tends to see all things as equal to one another in their primordial, natural, undifferentiated condition and to regard all differentiation as arbitrarily made to facilitate human understanding.[8] The equality or nondifferentiation of things constitutes the central theme of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi,* and at the end of that chapter, where he recounts a fascinating dream of his, the philosopher claims that he is never sure whether he is dreaming or awake, whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi the philosopher.[9] He is not, however, perversely denying all differences or their usefulness, but he does refuse to attach any special value to difference or the negative knowledge based on it. By revealing the undeclared assumptions of Huizi's argument, he shows

that all knowledge, negative as well as positive, has only relative validity and that the negative moment necessarily contains and depends on a prior moment of the positive knowledge of differentiation. Ultimately, therefore, Graham is right to see the whole debate between Zhuangzi and Huizi as an argument for the relativity of knowledge. From that perspective, then, it would be untenable to insist on either the absolute validity of knowledge or its absolute impossibility, and to make a truth claim based on negative knowledge would appear just as pretentious as a dogmatic statement of truth.

RELATIVISM, UNIVERSALISM, AND THE RITES CONTROVERSY

The question of the validity of knowledge, of how to "establish and transmit understanding across the boundaries of language, geography, culture, and time," says David D. Buck, "lies at the very heart of Asian studies" or, one might say, cross-cultural studies in general.[10] Buck identifies cultural relativism and evaluative universalism as the two most commonly used paradigms in Asian studies and succinctly describes the core of relativist thinking as a skeptic's attitude toward "the issue of whether any conceptual tools exist to understand and interpret human behavior and meaning in ways that are intersubjectively valid."[11] But to speak of *human* behavior at all is already to have acknowledged the possibility of intersubjective understanding; otherwise, one can describe only one's own behavior empirically, without ever going beyond the strictly personal and subjective and comparing it with anyone else's to gain knowledge that pertains to the human, that is, intersubjective, condition. Buck's observation, however, concerns understanding across the gap of languages and cultures, which is presumably a much wider gap than that of mere intersubjectivity and in which the cultural differences involved are assumed to be much greater than differences within the same culture. It is for cross-cultural studies that Buck raises the question of whether conceptual tools are available across the gaps of fundamental differences.

In recognizing the importance of linguistic, national, ethnic, and other differences and in questioning the viability of using conceptual tools that are intersubjectively valid, Buck's relativist seems to bear some resemblance to Huizi, whose objection to Zhuangzi, as we have seen, is predicated on the recognition of fundamental differences. Zhuangzi, on the other hand,

may resemble the universalist in assuming a shared sensibility and common knowledge beyond difference or differentiation. As Buck describes it, however, the universalist position is not really universal but culturally specific, for it is a position related to Western colonialism and imperialism, the ethnocentric position adopted by those Europeans and North Americans who "chauvinistically held that their civilization was superior to others."[12] Here we may see the influence of a predominant relativist paradigm in studying alien cultures and societies, a paradigm that has increasingly gained ground since the 1960s, when Western philosophers and cultural anthropologists began to argue for the internal coherence of cultural values and beliefs, the necessity of abandoning narrow and ethnocentric Western views and of not imposing them on non-Western cultures. This seems to be a morally commendable gesture of cultural critique, by means of which Western scholars genuinely try to dissociate themselves from the racism and cultural hegemony of an embarrassing and erroneous past of Western colonialism.

The change of paradigms in cultural studies, however, proves to be much more complicated than the mere denunciation of colonialism. As Richard Bernstein argues, in the entire range of human and social sciences in recent times, we have seen a "movement from confidence to skepticism about foundations, methods, and rational criteria of evaluation," and as a result the relativist paradigm reigns everywhere. "There seems to be almost a rush to embrace various forms of relativism. Whether we reflect on the nature of science, or alien societies, or different historical epochs, or sacred and literary texts, we hear voices telling us that there are no hard 'facts of the matter' and that almost 'anything goes.' "[13] Once the old positivistic dogmas concerning reality, objectivity, rationality, and truth are exposed as prejudices and illusions, and once a rigid objectivism or metaphysical realism collapses, nothing seems able to check the swing of the pendulum in the paradigmatic change from objectivism to relativism.

In this respect, the controversy around Peter Winch's works is quite significant. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language games and arguing against the positivistic notion of objective truth, Winch maintains that knowledge or truth does not coincide with any reality outside the language in which that knowledge or truth is expressed and that different cultures may understand reality differently and may have distinct rules for playing their language games. "Reality is not what gives language sense," says Winch in one of his most controversial essays. "What is real

and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has."[14] If different cultures are all different forms of life engaged in different language games, and if there is nothing outside the various languages to provide an independent basis for description and evaluation, this type of thinking would lead inevitably to a sweeping cultural relativism that sees various cultures as totally incommensurable, intelligible only to those already living within the limits of a specific cultural system. Winch's argument tends to lead precisely to such relativism even though he himself maintains that "men's ideas and beliefs must be checkable by reference to something independent—some reality," and he explicitly rejects "an extreme Protagorean relativism."[15] Bernstein tries to disentangle Winch's argument from the very relativism Winch disclaims, but in his own critique, he also points out the controversial aspect of Winch's works, which does seem "to entail a new, sophisticated form of relativism."[16] In facing an alien society, says Winch, the social scientist must become a participant in a language game different from his own, and his "reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose, if it is to count as genuine understanding at all, the participant's unreflective understanding."[17] That is to say, sociologists or anthropologists must suspend their own views and must think, feel, and act like natives of the alien society in order to understand it "unreflectively," from the native's point of view.

It is not at all clear, however, how anyone can achieve "unreflective understanding" in thinking about a different culture. If "unreflective" means completely assimilated and internalized to the point of being unaware of the very rules of the language game, one may wonder how anyone can enter and participate in a different game in the first place. It would be nearly as impossible as knowing a fish's happiness as a fish does. The desire to escape from one's own prejudice and to assume an alien point of view, as Bernstein notes, simply reenacts "a parallel move in nineteenth-century hermeneutics and historiography, where it was thought that we can somehow jump out of our skins, concepts, and prejudgments and grasp or know the phenomenon as it is in itself."[18] Georgia Warnke also sees a connection between Winch and romantic hermeneutics. "Does Winch suppose, as Dilthey does," Warnke asks, "that social scientists can simply leave their native languages behind them in learning a new one? Or, as in Gadamer's hermeneutics, are the two languages or sets of prejudices brought into relationship with one another and, if so, how?"[19] These are of course crucial hermeneutic questions that Winch's argument prompts us to consider,

questions that are particularly relevant to the concept of cross-cultural understanding. It is perhaps to this relevance that Gerald Bruns alludes when he characterizes Winch's works as "deeply involved with the subject of hermeneutics, that is, with its *Sache*—what hermeneutics is *about*."[20] Winch constantly calls our attention to the differences between cultures and languages, but the important hermeneutic question is, How does one achieve understanding beyond and in spite of those differences? His advice to assume a participant's "unreflective understanding," however, does not seem to offer a particularly helpful answer.

In his discussion of understanding alien societies, Winch is "mainly, though not exclusively, concerned about the nature of one man's understanding, in moral terms, of the lives and actions of *others*."[21] In his controversial essay "Understanding a Primitive Society," he explicitly states that he is trying "to suggest that the concept of *learning from* which is involved in the study of other cultures is closely linked with the concept of *wisdom*."[22] Here questions of hermeneutics become ethical questions as well, as one tries to understand an alien society in order to learn something from it, to expand one's vision, to get rid of one's ethnocentric prejudices, and to acquire moral knowledge of both the self and others. But understanding an alien society already presupposes a certain shared humanity rather than the insistence on difference, and adequate understanding does not entail abandoning one's own cultural values in order to become totally "unreflective" in one's own thinking. Understanding proves to be essential for the project of *Bildung*, or self-cultivation, but such learning and self-cultivation can neither be a projection of the self onto the Other nor a complete self-effacement to become the Other: it can be only a moment of mutual illumination and enrichment in what Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons. And that, as I have argued elsewhere, is the only way to learn from different cultures and societies.[23]

The openness to the challenge of others and the fusion of horizons will establish understanding and moral knowledge beyond skepticism and relativism without claiming absolute truth. In fact, it is often the cultural relativist that shows "a deep attachment to metaphysical realism itself" because the relativist argument usually proceeds in a specious line of all-or-nothing: "First, an impossible demand is made, say, for unmediated presentness to reality as it is in itself or for an actual universal agreement about matters of value. Next, it is claimed that this demand cannot be met. Then, without any further ado," as Martha Nussbaum shows in a cogent

analysis, the relativist "concludes that everything is up for grabs and there are no norms to give us guidance in matters of evaluation."[24] What Nussbaum proposes as an alternative, or what she calls Aristotelian essentialism, is a list of basic human functioning capabilities that constitute the basis of a notion of goodness in human life without pretending to be either absolute or exhaustively universal. That is also essentially Bernstein's point in arguing for the necessity of breaking away from the dichotomy of either/or thinking and moving beyond objectivism and relativism.

Insofar as ethics is concerned, one may wonder whether the recognition of both cultural difference and its corollary relativist attitude is necessarily tied to a morally superior position, where one becomes a better person with more sympathy for others and greater respect for cultural heterogeneity. Conversely, one may wonder whether beliefs in any type of universal rights and values are necessarily related to ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism. If we go back to my earlier suggestion that Zhuangzi seems to resemble the universalist in assuming the possibility of common knowledge beyond fundamental differences, his universalism certainly has nothing to do with the universalism tainted by Western colonialism or imperialism since Zhuangzi's argument for the commonality of knowledge is based on an egalitarian rather than a supremacist point of view. Indeed, from the perspective informed by Zhuangzi's insights, I argue that the belief in the possibility of common knowledge and cross-cultural understanding and in the availability of conceptual tools for the interpretation of human behavior across the boundaries of language, geography, culture, and time can indeed come from a genuine appreciation of the *equal capabilities* of different individuals, peoples, and nations. In other words, a universalist position, like the one grounded in the belief—like Zhuangzi's—in the fundamental equality of things, is not tied to colonialism or ethnocentrism. On the other hand, it is entirely possible and perfectly logical for cultural supremacists to take a relativist position in order precisely to emphasize cultural difference and to insist on the superiority and correctness of their own values in preference to those of others.

We can find an illuminating example in the so-called Chinese rites controversy, which marked an early cultural conflict between the East and the West in the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth and in which the Catholic Church, its popes and missionaries, the monarchs of Europe, the emperors of China, as well as some leading philosophers of the time, notably Voltaire and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, were

all involved. The rites controversy, as George Minamiki reminds us, has two related aspects: one has to do with "the problem of how Western man was to translate into the Chinese language the concepts of the divinity and other spiritual realities," that is, the issue of terminology, and the other concerns the problem of "how he was to judge, on a moral basis, the ceremonies performed by the Chinese in honor of Confucius and their ancestors," that is, the issue of rites proper, and the controversy brings to the fore a range of problems in "the whole field of cross-cultural understanding and missionary accommodation."[25]

Insofar as the terminology issue was concerned, the debate arose among the missionaries from a profound difference in opinion with regard to the nature of the Chinese language and thinking. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the famous Jesuit missionary and head of the China mission, learned the Chinese language and spread the idea that "traces of Christianity" existed in Chinese culture and customs, including "evidences of the cross among the Chinese."[26] He found in ancient Chinese writing the ideas of *tian* 天 (Heaven), *zhu* 主 (Lord), and *shangdi* 上帝 (Sovereign on High) and made use of these terms to translate the Christian God. Of the word *tianzhu* 天主 (Lord of Heaven) for translating "God," Ricci says that the missionaries "could hardly have chosen a more appropriate expression."[27] Obviously he had no doubt about the possibility of translating concepts and terms of Christianity into Chinese, and in *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義 (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), his treatise on the Christian doctrine, written in Chinese and published in 1604, Ricci tried to present the Western religious content in Chinese garb as elegantly as possible. The book "consisted entirely of arguments drawn from the natural light of reason, rather than such as are based upon the authority of Holy Scripture," and it "contained citations serving its purpose and taken from the ancient Chinese writers; passages which were not merely ornamental, but served to promote the acceptance of this work by the inquiring readers of other Chinese books."[28] Here we see Ricci playing the language game according to its rules, but he is by no means unreflective in using an alien language to serve his own purpose, for he does so in order to win over some high officials at the court of the Chinese emperor and to work toward the eventual Christian conversion of China.

"Ricci's plan for the conversion of the Chinese," as Haun Saussy comments, "involved appropriating the language of the canonical books and official Confucianism to give Catholicism the vocabulary, and incidentally

the prestige, it lacked. Converting the Chinese required, as a first step, converting the Classics."[29] For that conversion, linguistic and cultural differences were not of primary interest except as obstacles to be overcome, for Ricci was much more intent on seeing the Chinese as potential fellow Christians and the Chinese language and culture as somehow compatible with the Christian doctrine. His strategy to appropriate the Chinese classics was to argue that they contain the divine revelation of natural religion, which had prepared the Chinese to receive the light of revealed religion.[30] In reading the Confucian classics as compatible with Christianity, the Jesuit fathers gave the Chinese canonical texts a typological interpretation that separated them from their native context and presented them as shadows and prefigurations of the spiritual reality of Christ and his teachings. Lionel Jensen argues that "Confucius" is not a simple translation of the name of the great Chinese philosopher but a Jesuit invention, "a spiritual confrere who alone among the Chinese had preached an ancient gospel of monotheism now forgotten." Such appropriation of Confucianism and the Chinese classics enabled the missionaries to overcome the cultural strangeness they encountered in late Ming China and, more significantly, "to represent themselves to the natives as the orthodox bearers of the native Chinese tradition, *ru*."[31]

Filtered through Jesuit interpretation, Confucian moral and political philosophy had a notable impact on the European imagination, and the idea that the Chinese had achieved perfection in natural religion became especially appealing to many philosophers. By the end of the seventeenth century, as Arthur Lovejoy remarks, "it had come to be widely accepted that the Chinese—by the light of nature alone—had surpassed Christian Europe both in the art of government and in ethics."[32] In his enthusiastic desire for Europe and China to learn from each other, Leibniz held that "it would appear almost necessary that Chinese missionaries should be sent to us to teach us the use and practice of natural religion (*theologia naturalis*), just as we send missionaries to them to teach them revealed religion."[33] Voltaire's admiration of Confucius was boundless, and, in the words of Adolf Reichwein, this Chinese philosopher "became the patron saint of eighteenth-century Enlightenment."[34] Such widespread enthusiasm for a pagan culture, however, was bound to alarm the doctrinal purists in the Catholic Church. Ricci's belief in a common understanding of the concept of the divinity, the idea of the true God shared by peoples in China and the West, soon became the target of severe criticism after his

death; it was contested by his opponents as the focus of the rites controversy and finally condemned in the official decrees issued by several popes from Clement XI in 1704 to Benedict XIV in 1742.

The cultural conflict between the East and the West came to a head in the rites controversy, in which the Catholic Church reasserted the spiritual exclusiveness of the Christian faith and the fundamental cultural difference between Christianity and the pagan Chinese culture. Whether the Chinese and the Europeans could possibly have the same idea of God and other spiritual realities across linguistic and cultural differences can be recast as the basic question of translatability, and it is the doctrinal purist's position in the church that the Chinese language, as a language of matter and mundane concerns, cannot possibly express the spiritual concepts and values of Christianity. The use of the Chinese expression of *shangdi* (Sovereign on High) to mean "God" and the word *tian* to refer to "Heaven" were officially condemned by Clement XI in 1704 and again in 1715. Of course, the problem of terminology bewildered not only the Catholic missionaries in their effort to convey Christian ideas in Chinese but also the Buddhist monks, who had encountered a similar problem earlier in history in translating their sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese, and the Protestant missionaries, who were again to face this question when they tried to put out their Chinese version of the Bible. The dilemma in translation, as Arthur F. Wright puts it, is a difficult and undesirable choice:

> Select, as equivalents for key terms, native terms which already enjoyed great prestige, and in so doing risk the obliteration of the distinctive meaning of the original concept; or select as equivalents terms which, when used in an explained technical sense, more adequately translate the meaning of the original, but at the cost of familiarity and prestige and at the risk of uncouthness.[35]

It seems that to translate is always to negotiate between such undesirable choices in an attempt to find conceptual and linguistic equivalents that are, unfortunately, never quite the same, never completely identical. The translation of terms turns out to be nothing more than a compromise reached at the end of this negotiating process, and it is consequently a makeshift, and unacceptable to the staunch purist, who demands nothing less than the unadulterated essence of the original. The frequent complaint is that the Chinese language, which is allegedly too concrete and this-worldly, cannot express the spiritual meanings of the religious

concepts of Christianity. “Is there any convenient method of stating the doctrine of the Trinity, which does not imply the grossest materialism?” asked one Protestant priest in despair. “Who has been fortunate enough to discover a name for sin which does not dash us on the Scylla of civil crime or engulph [*sic*] us in the Charybdis of retribution for the faults of a former life?”[36]

According to the purist argument, linguistic and cultural differences are so unbridgeable that foreign ideas, especially those of Western religious thinking that have been molded in a long history from the Hebrews and the Greeks to the modern Europeans, are all untranslatable. Not only that, they are simply inconceivable in the Chinese mind and unavailable to the Chinese language. That is roughly the argument Ricci's opponents advanced against his assimilation of Chinese views and terms in propagating Christianity through cultural accommodation. They complained that the Chinese men of letters converted by Ricci remained as Confucian as ever and had no real understanding of Christianity and that “where they appear to speak of our God and his Angels,” as the Franciscan father Antonio de Caballero remarks with obvious impatience and scorn, “they are merely aping the Truth.”[37] Caballero's remark takes cultural difference as a matter of right or wrong, truth or deception, and his simian metaphor serves to expose the Chinese converts as fake Christians or inadequate imitators.[38] This should remind us of the ominous implications of the relativist position, the fact that when the cultural supremacists mark the fundamental difference and emphasize that they are different from the non-Western Other, they are in effect saying that they are better and superior and that they are the original model distorted by inadequate imitations.

Judging from Confucianism's tenacious grip on the Chinese mind in late imperial China and the negligible number of Chinese converts whom the missionaries succeeded in proselytizing, no one can overlook the enormous gap between Chinese and Western cultural traditions. In fact, the Jesuit approach of cultural accommodation was itself the outcome of a clear recognition of cultural differences, the realization that China was so far away and so different from Europe and had such a long history of its own civilization that it would be impossible to change the millions of Chinese into Portuguese or Italians. According to Bonnie Oh, the policy of cultural accommodation that Ricci implemented in China “took into consideration the high level of civilization in the Asian countries, recognized

the futility of trying to make Westerners out of Asians, and demonstrated a willingness to accommodate to the native culture."[39] The policy dictated that the Jesuit missionaries "speak, read, and write the native languages; become an integral part of a particular civilization and behave like the natives of the country," in short, as Joseph Sebes puts it pointedly, "Become Chinese to win China for Christ."[40] The last clause makes it clear that the Jesuit policy of cultural accommodation was ultimately dictated by their religious agenda of the Christian conversion of China, but that does not change the fact that accommodation was based on the recognition of cultural difference, nor does it rule out the possibility that the Jesuit acculturation might have had consequences detrimental to their original agenda or motivation, as the Vatican seemed to believe.

If their accommodation to Chinese culture and customs was the result of a clear sense of cultural difference, then Ricci and his supporters should perhaps be characterized, in the sense Buck has defined, as relativist rather than universalist, but such a characterization would contradict Ricci's belief in the translatability of Western concepts and ideas into Chinese, the possibility of a shared understanding of the notion of God and other spiritual realities across the boundaries of language, geography, culture, and time. Such a contradiction does not so much reveal a problem with Jesuit accommodation as show the limitation and inadequacy of terms like "relativism" and "universalism" in cross-cultural studies, especially when certain values are attached to these terms. Relativism, the emphasis on cultural differences between the West and the non-West, may indeed suggest an open-minded acceptance of the values of an alien culture, the willingness to see the positive in what is different from one's own tradition. There is, however, nothing inherently benign about a relativist attitude; moreover, as the purist argument in the Chinese rites controversy shows, it is just as possible that the relativist emphasis on difference may serve to legitimize a position of cultural supremacy.

For a doctrinaire like Caballero, cultural difference, the difference between true faith and its poor imitation, is as categorical as the difference between humans and apes, and his metaphor recalls Huizi's assurance of the distinction between man and fish. In this connection, then, we may put the same question to the relativist as Zhuangzi did: "How do you know that I do not know about a fish's happiness?" To put it in a way more relevant to our concerns: How do you know that I do not know about another culture and its concepts? On what basis can you claim to have knowledge

about me but at the same time deny me the possibility of knowing? Put in such terms, the question may help us realize that the purist or the skeptic, far from being a humble and unassuming relativist with a great deal of respect for the alien and the culturally different, assumes a great deal of knowledge about both the self and others despite the relativist claim that it is impossible to know the others. "Skepticism," as Saussy argues, "requires making even stronger epistemic claims than does naïveté. It requires that the naïve claims be testable and that it itself be capable of doing the testing."[41] Implicit in such skepticism is an unmistakable sense of superiority, even arrogance, a sense that only the skeptic knows both the East and the West and knows them to be fundamentally different and incommensurate.

To recast the question again in terms of translatability, the problem is not whether a particular translation is adequate or not but whether translation can be accomplished at all. Even if Ricci's use of *tianzhu* or *shangdi* as equivalent Chinese terms for "God" were bad translations, does that mean that the very idea of God or divinity is inconceivable in the Chinese mind and inexpressible in the Chinese language? Here I am concerned not with vindicating Ricci's choice of terms but with the implications of the question of translatability. With all sorts of associated connotations embedded in the nexus of Chinese words, *tianzhu, shangdi,* or *shen* 神 (spirit, deity, divinity) cannot be strictly *identical* to the word "God," but if we are talking about cross-cultural understanding at all, we are talking about the *equivalent,* not the identical. What is identical, anyway? If one cannot step into the same river twice, as the ancient Greeks knew, if we realize that all things exist in a state of flux in temporal as well as in spatial terms, can we still speak of a river as the same river, that is, identical to itself? Obviously not, and yet we speak of the "same river" in the sense of close equivalence or what Saussure calls "synchronic identity" as opposed to real identity.[42] Linguistic and cultural differences between China and the West are obvious, that is, in the etymological sense of "standing in the way" (*ob viam*) like obstacles, and it is the task of translation to clear the way for understanding and communication by discovering equivalent formulations underneath the changing surface of differences. If we insist on complete and absolute identity, then nothing can be translated, and the demand for an unadulterated original essence would preclude translation. From the purist and dogmatic point of view, the only language ca-

pable of expressing Christian ideas, insofar as the expression of spiritual meaning is concerned, is a Western language.

But what about the difference among the various Western languages themselves? Is the English word "God" always exactly identical to the Latin "Deus"? And do these words always precisely translate the Hebrew word *elohim*? If we go on asking, the question of translatability becomes more complicated and the answer less certain. The translation of the Bible into every modern language has never gone unchallenged for all sorts of reasons. William Tyndale had to defend his English translation in the early sixteenth century, and throughout the second half of that century, the Catholic polemicists repeatedly accused Protestant translators of "including deliberately heretical mistranslations in their versions."[43] Pushing its logic to the extreme, the purist position would do away with language altogether in order to preserve the concept of God as pure spirit. For a spiritualist theologian, even the biblical Hebrew may appear too concrete, too bound up with the literal sense of the physical world, and filled with too much anthropomorphism to express the pure idea of an abstract God.[44]

As Antoine Berman observes, resistance to translation was first of all "of a religious and cultural order" and "ordered around *untranslatability as a value*." Just as in the Jewish tradition it is believed that the oral Torah should not be translated into the written language, likewise "the sacred text should not be translated into other languages, lest it lose its 'sacred' character." This has tremendous influence on our thinking about secular literature as well because the rejection of translation, Berman goes on to say, "traverses the whole history of the West, with the dogma, never made explicit and continually refuted practically, of the untranslatability of poetry, without mentioning the famous 'prejudicial objection' against translation in general."[45] This seems to show that the prejudice against translation in the West has always been related to a religious and cultural notion of abstract concepts and transcendental values, the purist notion of untranslatable spiritual essence. One can well imagine how much greater the resistance would be to a translation that attempts to bridge the cultural gaps between the East and the West and how much more difficult it would be to answer the following question with any assurance: Can the Chinese language express abstract, spiritual notions?

The answer to this question can of course come from all directions, and a negative answer does not necessarily indicate a supremacist attitude. As

a sinologist, Wright recognizes translation as always a compromise and finds the purist view impractical, but in his discussion of the difficulties of translation, he finally agrees with those grumbling missionaries in seeing Western concepts as impossible to translate into Chinese because "the Chinese [language] was relatively poor in resources for expressing abstractions and general classes or qualities. 'Truth' tended to develop into 'something that is true.' 'Man' tended to be understood as 'the people'—general but not abstract. 'Hope' was difficult to abstract from a series of expectations directed toward specific objects."[46] Here the cultural difference between the Chinese and the Western is formulated as fundamentally distinct ways of thinking and speaking, such as the ability, or lack of it, to express abstract ideas.

Jacques Gernet even more straightforwardly endorsed the Catholic purist view, especially that of Longobardi, whose work he considers to be "most interesting for the history of Chinese reactions to Christian theses."[47] In his discussion of the conflict between Christianity and Chinese culture, Gernet traces all the difficulties the missionaries encountered in China to a fundamental difference, "not only of different intellectual traditions but also of different mental categories and modes of thought."[48] In Chinese, he declares, it is "so difficult to express how the abstract and the general differ fundamentally, and not just occasionally, from the concrete and the particular. This was an embarrassment for all those who had, in the course of history, attempted to translate into Chinese concepts formed in inflected languages such as Greek, Latin, or Sanskrit. Thus, linguistic structures inevitably pose the question of modes of thought."[49] This statement flies in the face of all Chinese translations of Buddhist sutras in the past and of Western works in more recent times, but for Gernet probably all Chinese translations are nothing more than embarrassing corruptions of the original Indo-European ideas. With the assurance of an expert, Gernet asserts that the Chinese language "has the peculiar, distinctive feature of possessing no grammatical categories systematically differentiated by morphology. . . . Furthermore, there was no word to denote existence in Chinese, nothing to convey the concept of being or essence, which in Greek is so conveniently expressed by the noun *ousia* or the neuter *to on*. Consequently, the notion of being, in the sense of an eternal and constant reality, above and beyond that which is phenomenal, was perhaps more difficult to conceive, for a Chinese."[50] In such a formulation, the Chinese language appears to be a language of concrete things and specific objects,

a language bogged down in matter and unable to rise above the ground of materiality and literality toward any spiritual height. The judgment is thus not on Chinese translation of particular foreign words and concepts but on the very nature and ability of the Chinese language as a whole. Given the fact that the relativist views, as Buck observes, are "advanced with much more frequency among Asianists" than universalist ones, it is not surprising that such a view of a concrete and material Chinese language has gained some currency in the circle of sinological studies.[51] A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the cultural difference between China and the West, and the formulation of that difference in terms of a contrast between the concrete and the abstract finds an elaborate counterpart in the study of Chinese literature.

NOTES

1. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1895?), *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, xvii, in vol. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1954), 267–268. Hereafter abbreviated as *Zhuangzi.*

2. A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Arguments in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 81.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* English translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 21. For *phronēsis,* see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* VI, 8, 1142a: "That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is evident; for it is, as has been said, concerned with the ultimate particular fact, since the thing to be done is of this nature," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle,* ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1030.

4. A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzŭ: The Inner Chapters* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), 123.

5. Graham, *Disputers,* 80, 81.

6. In his exegesis of this passage, Cheng Xuanying (fl. 637–655) thus rephrases Zhuangzi's retort to Huizi: "If you argue that I am not a fish and therefore cannot know about fish, then how can you, who are not me, know about me? If you are not me and yet can know about me, then, I, though not a fish, can know about fish" (*Zhuangzi,* xvii, 268).

7. *Zhuangzi,* ii, 32.

8. The term "synthesising vision" is Graham's. The theme of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi,* Graham maintains, is "the defence of a synthesising vision against Confucians, Mohists and Sophists, who analyse, distinguish alternatives and debate which is right or wrong" (Graham, *Chuang-tzŭ,* 48).

9. See *Zhuangzi,* ii, 53–54. Though less radical in doubting the difference of identities, Montaigne in a different context also asks: "When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?" in Michel Eyqeum de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne,* trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), II:12, 331.

10. David Buck, "Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies, Editor's Introduction," *Journal of Asian Studies* 50 (February 1991): 29.

11. Ibid., 30.

12. Ibid.

13. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 3.

14. Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 12.

15. Ibid., 11.

16. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism,* 27.

17. Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 89.

18. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism,* 104.

19. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 110.

20. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 8.

21. Winch, *Ethics and Action,* 2.

22. Ibid., 42.

23. See Zhang Longxi, "The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn 1988): 108–131. An expanded version appears as chapter 1 of my book *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

24. Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," *Political Theory* 20 (May 1992): 213, 209.

25. George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), ix. For a study of the rites controversy that includes detailed discussion of many Chinese documents, see Li Tiangang 李天綱, *Zhongguo liyi zhi zheng: Lishi, wenxian he yiyi* 中國禮儀之爭：歷史，文獻和意義 (The Chinese Rites Controversy: History, Documents, and Meaning) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1998).

26. Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583–1610,* trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), 110, 111.

27. Ibid., 154.

28. Ibid., 448.

29. Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 36.

30. This view is well reflected in Nicola Trigault's "To the Reader," written in 1615, when he translated Ricci's diary from Italian into Latin and published it in Rome. If he could go back to China and have enough time, says Trigault, he would write about the Chinese and compose "the Code of Chinese Ethics, so that one may understand how well adapted is the spirit of this people for the reception of the Christian faith, seeing that they argue so aptly on questions of morality" (Ricci, *Journals of Matthew Ricci,* xv).

31. Lionel M. Jensen, "The Invention of 'Confucius' and His Chinese Other, 'Kong Fuzi,' " *Positions* 1 (Fall 1993): 415. The argument is fully developed in Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

32. Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism," *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1948), 105.

33. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Novissima sinica* (1699), preface; quoted in Lovejoy, ibid., 106.

34. Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century,* trans. J. C. Powell (New York: Knopf, 1925), 77.

35. Arthur F. Wright, "The Chinese Language and Foreign Ideas," in Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), and in *American Anthropologist* 55, no. 5, pt. 2, memoir no. 75 (December 1953): 289.

36. C. W. Mateer, "Lessons Learned in Translating the Bible into Mandarin," *Chinese Recorder* (November 1908): 608, quoted in Wright, ibid., 291.

37. Caballero, alias Sainte-Marie, *Traité sur quelques points importants de la mission de Chine* (Paris, 1701), 105; quoted in Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures,* trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 33.

38. According to Ernst Robert Curtius, the core of the metaphorical use of *simia* is the idea of bad imitation or pretentiousness. The ape metaphor "can be applied not only to persons but also to abstractions and artifacts which assume the appearance of being something they are not," in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 539.

39. Bonnie B. C. Oh, Introduction to Charles E. Ronan and Bonnie B. C. Oh, eds., *East Meets West: The Jesuits in China* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988), xix–xx.

40. Joseph Sebes, "The Precursors of Ricci," in Ronan and Oh, *East Meets West,* 23.

41. Saussy, *Chinese Aesthetic,* 10.

42. Saussure's notion of "synchronic identity" is in effect "equi-valence," that is, equal values to satisfy certain requirements. These are Saussure's examples: "we speak of the identity of two '8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris' trains that leave at twenty-four-hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything—the locomotive, coaches, personnel—is probably different. Or if a street is demolished, then rebuilt, we say that it is the same street even though in a material sense, perhaps nothing of the old one remains" (Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* trans. Wade Baskin [New York: Philosophical Library, 1959], 108).

43. Gerald Hammond, "English Translations of the Bible," in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 651.

44. See ibid., 647.

45. Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany,* trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 187.

46. Wright, "Chinese Language and Foreign Ideas," 287.

47. Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact,* 9.

48. Ibid., 3.

49. Ibid., 239.

50. Ibid., 241.

51. Buck, "Forum on Universalism and Relativism," 32. For works that present views more or less similar to Wright's, see Chad Hansen, *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983); David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); and a number of other works. For a critique and a different view of the Chinese language, see Graham, "The Relation of Chinese Thought to the Chinese Language," appendix 2 to *Disputers of the Tao,* 389–428.